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Adaptation and Self-Expression in *Julie/Julia*

Julie/Julia stands out in several ways. What had begun, in 2002/2003, as a highly popular blog, in which New Yorker Julie Powell tracks her experience of cooking all the recipes in Julia Child's classic cookbook *Mastering the Art of French Cookery*, became one of the first notable, commercially successful 'blooks' – a neologism that denotes blogs adapted into books.¹ As a visible sign of this achievement, *The Julie/Julia Project* was awarded with the inaugural 'Blooker Prize' in 2006.² A few years later, *Julie/Julia* again pioneered in being the first blog (or blook, for that matter) to be adapted into a Hollywood movie, Nora Ephron's *Julie & Julia*.³

In the following, I want to discuss *Julie/Julia*, and its adaptations from blog to book to film, as an instructive case study of life writing in the digital age.⁴ There are two things I want to trace in my discussion. First, I explore how these adaptations throw into relief the distinct conditions for life-narrative in the respective media and genres that host the story of *Julie/Julia*, with a focus on the dynamics of the story's original formulation in the blog. I approach the *Julie/Julia* blog as a variation of the blog-genre variously termed "journal blog," "personal journal," "internet," "web," or "online diary"⁵ – all terms that conceptualize this genre as a remediation of well-established forms of life-writing. Remediation and the kind of adaptation that *Julie/Julia* exemplifies are sibling processes – they both involve the translation of text or textual conventions from one medium to another⁶ –, and the adaptations of Powell's blog retrace, if you will, some of the steps that the journal blog has taken as a remediation of life-writing in the old(er) media. Accordingly, my reading seeks to contour some of the remediated conventions employed in this exemplary blog and their transformations in the text's journey across three media.

Second, I will argue that these adaptations amplify a key element of the *Julie/Julia* blog – its

1 See Hayton for a discussion of this phenomenon.

2 See <http://blog.blookerprize.com/> for the prize's mission statement and for coverage of Powell's reception of the award.

3 Sporadically, the term 'flook' – "as in film based on a blook" (<http://blog.blookerprize.com/>) – has come up in this context.

4 "Life Writing in the Digital Age" was the title of the workshop in which this paper was originally presented. I want to thank the workshop's organizers, Heike Schäfer, Regina Schober, Bettina Soller, for putting together what proved to be a very inspiring panel.

5 This variety in terminology finds itself across the scholarship by Eisenlauer and Hoffmann, McNeill, Rettberg, Serfaty, and Sorapure, who often treat these terms as synonyms. For practical reasons, I will settle for the term 'journal blog' in the following, while it will be one of my points that we need a more precise terminology to deal with the distinctions that have emerged within the genre of the personal blog.

6 In their pioneering study, Bolter and Gruin conceptualize remediation very broadly, ranging from the formation of new media genres by way of 'absorbing' and 'repurposing' elements of old(er) media to instances of what other scholars would call adaptation (film versions of novels [44]) or even intertextuality ("a film borrows from another film" [49]).

self-consciousness and self-reflexivity – which greatly shape the life-narrative that the text tells. This self-consciousness and self-reflexivity, I suggest, has two roots. For one, it originates in the very conventions of this blog-genre. A variety of scholars have identified self-reflexivity as one of the properties of web-based life-writing, which they trace, both, to the conventions of the formats that these blogs remediate and to the specifics of the online medium. Viviane Serfaty sees journal blogs draw, with varying emphases, on the conventions of autobiography and of the diary, each of which entails its own brand of self-reflexivity. Autobiographies, and the ‘closed’ blogs that are modeled on them, are self-reflexive in that their narratives are typically oriented toward their own creation as a mark of closure: “From their very inception, autobiographies encompass their own ending, because they mean to show the reader the author’s progress from some point back in time to the time of writing itself” (Serfaty 461). Diaries, on the other hand, are characterized by a “sense of congruency between the lived and the written” (McNeill 40), which blogs that primarily employ this genre’s conventions further amplify through the immediacy of their online publication: “In their immediacy and accessibility, in their seemingly unmediated state, Web diaries blur the distinction between online and offline lives, ‘virtual reality’ and ‘real life,’ ‘public’ and ‘private,’ and most intriguingly for auto/biography studies, between the life and the text” (McNeill 25). In the kind of ‘open’ blogs that Serfaty and McNeill accordingly term web or online diaries, this proximity of life and text notably shows in the extent to which the life-experiences that these texts discuss include the experience of blogging, in which the sense of self that they express is also, quite centrally, a blogging self. The narrative premise of the *Julie/Julia* blog, that blends the immediacy of the diary’s daily record with the closed, goal-oriented logic of the autobiography, makes this text in particular combine the self-reflexive impulses of these conventions.

Next to the conventions of web-based life-writing, I see a second source for *Julie/Julia*’s self-reflexivity and self-consciousness in its adaptations and ‘adaptedness.’ Adaptations, as Linda Hutcheon notes, are inherently self-reflexive because they advertise the intertextuality of their origins. She calls adaptations “‘palimpsestuous’ works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts” (6), making overt their own referencing of other texts rather than of some extra-textual reality. For Hutcheon, to write or read a text as an adaptation means to reflect on the intertextual formation of this texts and, potentially, by implication, of all texts. In my reading, adaptation informs *Julie/Julia* on several levels, extending the self-reflexivity entailed in its dynamics as a journal blog into a markedly postmodern life-narrative. *Julie/Julia* is not only formally an adapted work, in that it has been ‘transposed,’ to use Hutcheon’s term, across three media, also its plot is very much about adaptation. As I will outline, the personal quest that the blog narrates, and that subsequent incarnations of the story transpose, can be read as a project of adaptation. This reading frames

Julie/Julia as an emphatically American, postmodern, postfeminist variation of the artist's autobiography – a text that invokes, and twists, well-established cultural narratives; a text about the creation of texts, and the self-expression that this affords.

The Blog: *The Julie/Julia Project*

The opening of the blog's narrative sees its narrator-protagonist at a moment of crisis – a crisis that the blog does not flesh out, but merely alludes to in Powell's ironic self-characterization in her first post:

Government drone by day, renegade foodie by night. Too old for theatre, too young for children, and too bitter for anything else, Julie Powell was looking for a challenge. And in the Julie/Julia project she found it. Risking her marriage, her job, and her cats' well-being, she has signed on for a deranged assignment. (25 August 2002).⁷

Although the “deranged assignment” for which Powell signs on is notably idiosyncratic, the project and its textual representation deeply resonate with established (master-) narratives. Framed as responding to a personal crisis and the desire to escape, the project invokes the quintessential American quest narrative but reverses its conventional direction. Rather than any place that signals distance from ‘civilization’ and its trappings, it is the iconic heart of civilization whence the narrator-protagonist ventures: the home, and more specifically, the kitchen – spaces which leagues of American characters, male and female, have sought to escape. The narrative of Powell's errand recodes the kitchen, from a space that connotes (feminine) conventionality and domestic entrapment to one that laminates privacy and publicity in ways that afford self-expression and, ultimately, empowerment. The kitchen that accommodates Powell's quest does not stand for gender-specific obligations and limitations, but rather for opportunities and a break from obligations.⁸ This recoding of the kitchen fundamentally builds on a correlation of cooking and writing as analogous forms of creative self-expression.

As many pieces of life-writing, *Julie/Julia* has its narrator-protagonist forge an identity out of

7 The blog is no longer available at its original location, <http://blogs.salon.com/>, but it can be accessed through the Wayback Machine. All quotations are taken from the archived version of the blog at <http://web.archive.org/web/20021217011704/http://blogs.salon.com/0001399/2002/08/25.html> and following. In parentheses, I will indicate the date of the post from which I quote (which also indicates the final digits of the url under which the post has been archived).

8 Thus focusing on and recoding the kitchen, *Julie/Julia* chimes in with many other contemporary texts that (re-)construct the kitchen as the iconic space of postfeminism. For a discussion of the (ambivalent) politics of postfeminist narratives of the kitchen, see Brunsdon, Hollows, or Smith.

acts of creation and creativity. However, the specific form of creativity around which the blog revolves – cooking and writing about cooking – challenges the more established models of the artist’s autobiography or novel from a postmodern, postfeminist vantage point. For one, it pushes the notion of ‘art’ on which narratives of creative selfhood conventionally draw: Domestic cookery is emphatically located in the realm of the mundane and it is connoted as a traditionally feminine activity – two aspects that place it outside dominant concepts of ‘art.’⁹ Second, the text conspicuously characterizes the creativity of Powell’s cookery as neither ‘original’ nor ‘autonomous,’ but as intertextual. At its core, the project of *Julie/Julia* is to adapt a book – not a novel but a cookbook. The blog’s narrative highlights the active work that is entailed in such a project of adaptation. The adapted work (the blog) does not passively copy its ‘source’ text (Child’s cookbook), it is rather created through a practical, laborious experiment – Powell’s effort to systematically prepare all the recipes in Julia Child’s book. In thus dramatizing the process of adaptation, the blog closely correlates reading, cooking, and writing as activities that provide Powell with the “challenge,” the project she is looking for in her quest for self-fulfillment. It thereby fashions the cookery on which its narrative focuses into a metonym for a particular type of identity-formative creativity: a creativity that is self-consciously mundane; that correlates the gastronomic and the literary; and that is about creating something new out of the engagement with pre-existing ideas and their representations.

As a project of adaptation, then, *Julie/Julia* is centrally concerned with texts – the work of carefully reading them, making sense of them, composing them. And thanks to the metonymic relationship between reading, writing, and cooking that the blog develops, the ‘texts’ to which it directs its attention include the verbal texts of Child’s cookbook and Powell’s own emergent blog as well as the gastronomical artifacts of the dishes created by the protagonist. Again and again, posts detail how Powell reads and laboriously interprets her source text in an effort to create something of her own, at the twin location of her kitchen and her writing desk, and tangibly in the form of her blog, which both discusses and embodies this work of reading and composition. For example, when an early post deliberates the sequence in which the protagonist should cook her way through Child’s book, it both reflects on the structure of the source book and on the dramaturgy that Powell wants to create for her own narrative:

Initially, I had thought to work through the book front to back. This quickly was declared impracticable. [...] So I decided to work through each chapter, beginning to end. This is advantageous because the ten chapters of recipes conveniently add up to 10 recipes per week,

9 There is a growing body of texts, chiefly by women writers, that use cooking as a topos in narratives of (feminine) self-expression and selfhood, from the culinary autobiographies of Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor or Maya Angelou to novels like Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent*. For a critical discussion of this tradition, see e.g. Goldman and Piatti-Farnell.

roughly equivalent to the pace I need to get through the thing in a year. Also, there is the suspense factor. Because the book is structured like a classic cooking lessons, building up from basic techniques, the going will get gradually tougher as the times go on. (26 August 2002)

Also the posts that detail Powell's actual kitchen experiments pay notable attention to the textuality and 'texturality' of the cultural artifacts that she reads and creates. They have the protagonist engage not just with the instructions encoded in Child's cookbook, but with the book's text – quoting from it, performing close readings. Her concern with the nuances in Child's language finds itself mirrored in a concern with the texture of the dishes she creates and the subsequent challenge to translate the experience of their consistency, smell, and taste into the medium of writing. Here is a (somewhat longer) passage from the blog that illustrates this:

Julia says Potage Parmentier 'smells good, tastes good, and is simplicity itself to make.' On this she is correct. What you do is this: peel a couple of potatoes and slice them up. Slice some leeks, rinse them real good to get rid of the dirt. Throw these two ingredients in a pot with some water, along with some salt. [...] Simmer this for 45 minutes or so, then either 'mash the vegetables in the soup with a fork' or pass them through a food mill. I don't have a food mill. I've got a potato ricer, which is one of those gadgets we have that mostly seems to take up far too much precious Brooklyn shelf space for the good it does. So that part was sort of a pain in the neck. The Cuisinart tempted. But Julia warns against it, enthusiastic though she is about the appliance much of the time. She allows as how it will turn soup into 'something un-French and monotonous,' and though I am suspicious of any suggestion that uses the construction 'un-French,' when I'm done with the ricer I can see what she means. (30 August 2002)

Passages like this dominate the *Julie/Julia* blog. The overall narrative structure of the blog is episodic, organized around the daily challenge of working through yet another set of Child's 524 recipes. The potential larger story-arc that binds these episodes together – a story-arc that might unfold the purpose and meaning of the project – is explicitly excluded from the blog's narrative. Powell writes in an early post: "For the moment, I will not tackle the existential query, 'Why, Julie? Why Julia? Why now?'" (26 August 2002), and she never returns to these questions. In this episodic rhythm, the *Julie/Julia* blog reflects one of the key properties of weblog narrative identified by scholars like Jill Walker Rettberg. Other characteristic features like the fragmentation and open-endedness Serfaty and Eisenlauer/Hoffmann emphasize are less pronounced in *Julie/Julia*. Its thematic focus, on the experience of cooking all the recipes in one cookbook, marks a difference from the thematically open web diaries that some scholars generalize journal blogs to be. *Julie/Julia*'s thematic focus provides the blog with a more fixed structure – with a clear beginning and clear end, and with a topical anchor for its narrative. It is first and foremost the blog's episodic structure, and the immediacy it conveys, that registers the text's distinct genre and medium.

The Book: *Julie and Julia: 365 Days, 524 Recipes, and 1 Tiny Apartment Kitchen*

This episodic structure is all but absent in the book. Instead of tracking the serial challenge of Powell's project, the book makes an effort to develop a coherent plot, in ways more reminiscent of the conventions of autobiography than of the diary's. And in this plot, the question about the 'why,' expressly eclipsed from the blog, plays a central role. In the chronology of events, the book's narrative begins before the first blog-post and characterizes the narrator-protagonist as a diffusely frustrated woman in her late 20s. This frustration is not traced to a specific cause or object – Powell is cast as diffusely unhappy with 'modern life': The first chapter talks about a boring office-job, past dreams of becoming an actress (which are becoming less and less likely to materialize), about her gynecologist's advice that she should hurry up if she wants to have a baby, and about bizarre encounters at the New York subway. Proceeding from this scenario of crisis, the book relates a key experience that the protagonist has in her parent's house when she accidentally finds Julia Child's cookbook:

as I held it in my hands that morning, opened its cover sprangled with tomato-colored fleurs-de-lys, skimmed through its yellow pages, I felt like I'd at last found something *important*. Why? I bent again over the book's pages, searching for the cause of this strange feeling. It wasn't the food exactly. If you looked hard enough, the food started to feel almost beside the point. No, there was something deeper here, some code within the words, perhaps some secret embedded in the paper itself. (15)

With this scene and the sketch of the protagonist's personal crisis, the book fixes the contours of its plot, providing answers to all three 'why'-questions that Powell placed outside the blog's narrative. Yet these contours retain some degree of vagueness: Powell's crisis is rendered as general rather than individual, as something the protagonist vaguely feels without being able to attribute it to specific cause. And her discovery of Child's book, and the promise of redemption that it extends, is narrated with a notable air of epiphanic mystery that keeps elusive just how this project could solve Powell's problems.

From this point, the book develops a conventional success story, in which the heroine faces a series of challenges, whose depiction echoes the episodic rhythm of the blog, but subordinates this to the overarching plot of crisis, quest, and reward. It has the protagonist meet these serial challenges and, at the end of her journey, it sees her rewarded. In ways that markedly tap into the

conventions of the American success story, this reward comes in two closely interrelated forms – one, as immaterial, ‘spiritual’ reward, in the form of the self-affirmation and -confidence the character had been missing; and, two, as material reward, in the form of a book-contract that allows her to quit the office-job she hates, and that brings into being the book that contains this narrative.

The book-contract as a marker of the protagonist’s success shapes the teleology of the book’s narrative: Whereas the blog focuses on narrating how Powell cooks, the book chiefly narrates how she blogs about cooking. If the blog highlights the ‘cooking’-side of the analogy between cooking and writing that the text develops, the book foregrounds writing. It has its narrator find an identity as a writer, and doing so directs the book’s attention to itself – to its own existence as a tangible sign of the closure of its narrative.

The Film: *Julie & Julia*

The film goes even further in centering its Julie-Powell-narrative on one linear plot line, and in focusing this plot on the character’s self-making as a writer. A key scene that marks the film’s additional fixing of the plot concerns its rendition of the protagonist’s personal crisis, the crisis that sets in motion her quest. Only alluded to in the blog, kept vague and universal in the book, this crisis is specified and individualized in the film. The scene in question sees the protagonist return from an unpleasant day at work and an even less pleasant meeting with her college-friends, who strike her as having been more successful in their lives. This frustration crystallizes around one particular friend, Annabelle, who not only holds a more meaningful job than Powell feels to have, she also blogs – “every thought that passes through her brain; her stupid, vapid, insipid” The protagonist’s rant against her friend serves to reveal the root of her own unhappiness: she had always wanted to be a writer:

[Julie Powell:] I could write a blog. I have thoughts.

[Husband:] And you’re a writer, which is more than I can say for Annabelle.

[P:] If only that were true.

[H:] You wrote a novel.

[P:] Half a novel. And no one wanted to publish it.

It is this frustration about the ‘half novel’ that the film casts as Powell’s motivation to embark on her quest, weaving a linear plot between the character’s past failure as a writer and her eventual success, not just as a published author, but even as an author whose book has been turned into a

major Hollywood movie.¹⁰

This plot is reinforced by a second narrative that the film combines with Julie Powell's – a narrative about Julia Child, which the film adapts from her memoir *My Life in France*. The film juxtaposes its two protagonists not only along a shared love for French cuisine, but also by centering each of their plots on a writing-project: As Julie's plot revolves around her blog, Julia's plot focuses on her project of writing and publishing *Mastering the Art of French Cookery*. Julie's and Julia's plots abound in parallels and mutual resonances. The film accentuates how each character undertakes her writing-project because of a personal crisis: While Julie seeks to remedy the failure of her half novel, Julia is bored as the wife of an American diplomat in Paris. *Julie & Julia* dramatizes each of these writing-projects as projects of adaptation: Julie's plot takes its adaptation-theme from the blog-version, which I already discussed; Julia's plot highlights other forms of adaptation – the character's efforts to translate the complexities of French cuisine for American housewives, to convert the metric measurements common in France to those used in American households, or her struggle with the challenges of the French language. Finally, the film ends each of its plots with the publication of a book – Julia Child's monumental first cookbook that inaugurates her career as food writer and television personality, and Julie Powell's book. *Julie & Julia* advances these parallels also on a visual level, where it manages the juxtaposition of the two plots through visual cues that mark the similarities (and historical differences) of Julie's and Julia's stories. These visual cues chiefly relate to the two interrelated forms of creativity that drive the film life-stories – cooking and writing.

To conclude, then, the case study of life writing in a digital age that *Julie/Julie* – a text with evidently powerful resonances in early 21st century American culture – offers is instructive on several counts. First, its adaptations across three media throw into relief some of the particular dynamics of life-narrative in the online medium. The media-specific properties of the *Julie/Julia* blog that emerge in this context encourage more attention to distinctions within the genre(s) of the journal blog. The autobiographical practices performed in blogs have grown increasingly diverse, calling for concepts that better appreciate this diversity and dynamism. Second, *Julie/Julia* illustrates the deep embeddedness of new-media texts in well-established cultural narratives, and it samples some of the ways by which established narratives are re-worked there. I explored *Julie/Julia*'s evocations and appropriations of existing cultural patterns through a focus on its

¹⁰ Next to thus fleshing out the protagonist's personal crisis, the film also adds a larger, cultural dimension to her malaise by specifying the 'office job' in which the character feels entrapped: It has her work at a government agency that services victims of 9/11. In the film, the problem that she has with this job is not so much boredom as a sense of frustration and powerlessness in helping these people.

engagement with adaptation, reading it as a postmodern, postfeminist variation of the artist's autobiography. Its artist's plot gets increasingly streamlined and conventionalized in the story's journey from blog to book to film, in a narrative that, ironically, begins with and in a blog, and that ends in celebrating books.

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